

Epilogue

Were Gregory, Percival and Rush the 'founding fathers' of modern medical ethics? The preceding account has shown that those who wish to make sense of this question have to be prepared for considerably greater complexity than commonly has been assumed. On the one hand, the three physicians inhabited a moral world profoundly different from our own; on the other hand, they clearly helped prepare for change, both socially and conceptually. This balance is nowhere more obvious than in the way they understood the status of medicine in society and politics, and this provides a suitable perspective with which to conclude.

Medicine was for all three physicians a public science *par excellence*, but in this as in other respects, Rush's more extreme views underscore the point. It is not just that he depicted medical men as ideal politicians and soldiers; they were so because: 'The science of medicine is related to everything.'¹ Gregory and Percival also saw a wider public role for the medical profession, and they – especially Percival – were exemplary public men themselves. But the central point in their activity and outlook was to cultivate a public sphere that was outside the established political process. While not entirely apolitical, they were nevertheless remarkably uninvolved in politics. In the case of Gregory, it would be difficult to imagine it otherwise, given the structure of politics in Scotland. He does not, however, seem to have had any great *interest* in politics per se, and he certainly did not attempt to relate his views on the public nature of medical science, practice and profession to politics. Percival lived much closer to major political events and was on intimate footing with many central players, ranging from radicals, such as Priestley and Wilberforce, to establishment figures of many sorts. He was

throughout his life 'a temperate and constitutional Whig' who took 'a lively interest' in the politics of the day, especially during the French Revolution.² Yet he kept his distance to it all, and his active political engagement was restricted to the two issues of special concern to the Dissenters, repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and abolition of the slave trade. The whole drift of his numerous institutional activities was to create such public spheres as the hospital, the academy, the board of public health and the 'police', all of which are characterized by being outside of politics. It is exactly in this sense that the totally independent and self-contained Manchester hospital has a claim to being one of the first *public* institutions in the proper sense.

Robert Baker has suggested that Percival was instrumental in developing the idea of the physician as a quasi-public servant. In this view, the medical profession was given various privileges by government; when the physician joined the profession, he accordingly undertook an implied obligation to the government to serve the public in return for his privileged status.³ This is an interesting idea, but it seems to me to go against the whole tenor of Percival's life-long activity of creating and running public but firmly non-political institutions. This is underlined by what Percival actually says in the passage quoted by Baker:

Gentlemen of the faculty of physics, by the authority of different parliamentary statutes, enjoy an exemption from serving on inquests or juries; from bearing armour; from being constables or church-wardens; and from all burdensome offices, whether leet or parochial. These privileges are founded on reasons highly honourable to medical men; and should operate as incentives to that diligent and assiduous discharge of professional duty which the legislature has generously presumed to occupy the time and to employ the talents of physicians and surgeons, in some of the most important interests of their fellow citizens.⁴

Percival is not referring to government but to Parliament. It is the 'legislature', not executive government, that grants such privileges. This was a distinction with a good deal more significance in the eighteenth century when more than ninety per cent of the business of the House of Commons was to deal with private members' bills. The point of the privileges granted was that the gentleman-commoners of the realm provided protection to certain groups in their midst, *in casu* 'Gentlemen of the faculty of physic', *against* impositions by executive government. So while physicians have public obligations, they are not to government but to – the public.